

Isaiah 44:6-23

Gods made of wood

1. Introduction

The book of Isaiah emphasizes God's greatness. His greatness manifests itself in creation and in how he governs history. But God's greatness is equally apparent in the comparison between him and the idols. Isaiah 44 openly mocks those who fashion and worship idols. The idols and those who made them are as it were called to defend themselves in court. God challenges them to show their greatness, but the silence is deafening.

It looks like idol worship no longer exists, but appearances are deceptive. Even today this chapter of Isaiah poses some very relevant questions. What has Western society accomplished with the gods of their own making? What does the future hold for you if you do not seek your salvation in the living God?

2. General Remarks

1. Idols cannot help

With great irony, almost sarcastically, God shows us how ridiculous the idols are and how ridiculous it is to trust in them.

This mocking of the idols has to be seen in light of the circumstances God's people were in. God allows Isaiah to speak about the future of the people of Israel. We do not know exactly at what point in time the people heard these words. It is possible that they were already spoken before the deportation. It is also possible that the people did not hear or read these words until they actually were in exile. For our understanding of these words it does not make much difference.

The people of Judah are in grave danger as far as their existence as a nation is concerned. Then the question arises: Does our God hide himself? And they begin to compare. Are not the gods of Babylon (Bel and Nebo, see Isaiah 46:1) much stronger? After all, the power of God becomes apparent when it profits his people. People who set out to fight must have strong gods. How does God compare whose people are trampled under foot? It is quite understandable that the faith of many people in Judah is badly shaken.

There may be another reason why the idol worship is addressed here. God's own people had put their trust in many idols. This was the main reason for their deportation. It was not God who abandoned his people. Israel had said farewell to God and had chosen to serve idols.

The exile proves what idols do for you. Only God himself can bring about the exodus from the exile. Isaiah 44 shows this clearly. Trusting in idols is vanity. It is a good reason to turn your back on them for good.

2. Is this mockery effective?

It is often said that the mocking of idols in this chapter has missed its goal. The worship of images has been targeted here in particular, but does it not make a caricature of idol worship? After all, idol worship does not only pertain to images but focuses on the gods the worshipper sees represented in them. The handmade idol serves to make the god visible and tangible.

This observation is correct in the sense that no mention is made of the fact that there is a difference between the images and the gods that are portrayed. But do these gods exist, or do they only exist in the imagination of the one who fashions them?

Of course he sees more than his image, for to him his god is a real power. But in reality this is still only an imagination, no matter how much influence such an idea has. The penetrating irony of this chapter shows us what it really is: he who worships an idol, does not pray to a god, but to a piece of wood, a chunk of metal or a piece of stone. Man cannot create a god. Whatever man makes is always only human.

In contrast to this, the power of Israel's God, the only God, is emphasized. He, who has not been created by man, dares to compare himself with all idols. He is the God who sees, speaks, acts and redeems. Dumb pieces of wood are absolutely ridiculous compared to him.

3. Modern theology

The LORD mocks those who make their own gods. Idols and their images are created according to the design that people make in their own minds. Verse 13 says that the carpenter shapes the idol in the form of a man. Here we cannot help but think of what happens in modern theology. According to modern thought the Bible is not God's revelation, but a testimony of human experiences. Thus the Bible becomes a book in which the ancient Israelites related their thoughts about and their experiences with God. This written testimony clearly bears the mark of its time. And, as the Israelites of that time were allowed to have their own thoughts about God, so we as Christians are allowed to have ours today. What God reveals about himself is not normative, but rather what man thinks of God. This line of thinking comes close to what Isaiah 44 rejects so strongly: making your own gods. We see this very clearly in a book written by Prof. H. M. Kuitert.¹ He maintains that everything we say about things that are above, come from below. Man creates for himself an image of God, which is shaped by the image they have of themselves and the world around them (p. 23). People develop their experiences into a certain concept of God (p. 49). The same happens in the "Christian tradition," which creates images based on the awareness of God (p. 50).

It goes without saying that gods which are fabricated on the basis of human ideas, are exactly as people want to see them: they are perfectly suited to their thoughts, feelings and needs. Whatever is not agreeable to their understanding and feelings has to be deleted from the Christian doctrine. If human desires are stifled by old-fashioned norms, then these norms have to be adjusted to a more contemporary view.

Instead of God ruling over the people whom he has created, people rule over gods of their own making. But faith in idols is very deceptive. Faith in the living and incomparable God, is exchanged for trust in an idea which is not based on reality and does not correspond with what God has revealed about

¹ *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof*, Baarn, 1992.

himself. In this way salvation is forfeited. Products of the human mind cannot save us. Only God, who says of himself that he formed Israel and that he will not forsake his people, is the God of salvation. He, who is the first and the last - besides him there is no God - he is the King and Redeemer of Israel (cf. Isaiah 44:6, 21ff.).

4. Comparable passages in Isaiah

The topic "God and the idols" is repeatedly mentioned in the second part of Isaiah. We can compare the following passages: 40:19-20; 41:7; 42:8, 17; 45:16-20; 46:1-7. Time and again we see that God is the only one and that he does not tolerate competition. He is the Redeemer of his people and those who trust in idols will be put to shame.

3. Annotations to the text

Verse 6-8

The LORD God begins his mockery of the idols by proclaiming who he is and what he is like. He is the *King*. He is almighty to lead and govern his people as he wills. He, the LORD of hosts, has the power to redeem his people. He is the Redeemer, the *Goel* of his people. *Redemption* is a term we find in the Mosaic laws, used for the purpose of restoring family members to their rightful place (cf. Leviticus 25:23-34). This term, which we find often in Isaiah 40-66, is applicable here too. The LORD brings his people, who were carried off into exile, back to the Promised Land; thus he is the Redeemer of his people, the *Redeemer of Israel*.

The LORD is the only One, the First and the Last (cf. Revelation 1:17; 22:13). He established his *people of old*. He also holds the future in his hand.

This God confidently challenges the idols. Let them show how they measure up to him. There is no other God. Israel only has one *Rock* to build on; the God who cannot be compared to anyone, calls his people in their distress to trust in him alone.

Verse 9-11

In these verses we read of the folly of idol worship. Praying to idols has no effect. The focus here is on images cut or carved out of wood or metal. Those who make these images are foolish in themselves, they are *vanity*. This is even more pronounced in the images they make. The craftsmen are attached to their creations, they treasure them. But they are of no use at all. If you think realistically, you will realize that a block of wood or a piece of metal cannot think or see, let alone help anyone. Who in his right mind would make such an image his god!

Verse 11 makes us think of a court case. As in verse 7-8 the idols are challenged to measure themselves up to the only God, so now the craftsmen are called to account.

These craftsmen are *only human*. How is it possible that man can make a god who turns out to be more powerful than man himself? When they stand before God, they will realize that they have no god at all. They have trusted in vain. When challenged by the only true God, they will be terrified.

The verdict of this "court case" is that "friends" of the idols will be put to shame.

Verse 12-17

This section describes how the images are fashioned. It is dripping with mockery.

First we see the blacksmith at work. Making idols is hard work! The blacksmith exhausts himself and doesn't take time to eat or drink. He invests an enormous amount of energy into his god. This was probably a metal icon, but it is also possible that the blacksmith is overlaying a wooden image with metal (cf. Jeremiah 10:3).

Next we see a carpenter. His design is very beautiful. Using a number of different measuring tools, he draws the outline of his future god. (Compare this description with Isaiah 40:12, how God measured his creation.) The image becomes a real work of art, a "man in all his glory": the idol is shaped in the form of man, beautiful to behold, placed in "a shrine". Again we are forced to note the difference with the immeasurable God, who sits enthroned in the heavens.

Verse 14 brings us to an earlier phase of the fabrication of the idols. The carpenter searches the forest to select a suitable tree, then tends to it carefully. Then he cuts it down. He uses the wood for various purposes. He lights a fire to warm himself. How he bakes bread and roasts his meat over the fire is described in great detail. You can almost see the carpenter sitting beside the fire, rubbing his hands contentedly. But a piece of wood is left over; he could still make a god out of that. The order in which the wood is used, emphasizes how ridiculous it is to make images. After most of the wood has been used up for household purposes, the leftovers are used to make a god. "Save me; you are my god!" What it means is that these words are spoken to a piece of firewood.

Verse 18-20

While the previous verses mocked the making of images, now the conclusion is drawn. Actually the craftsmen themselves ought to come to this conclusion. However, they are not able to do so, for they have just as little insight as the images they make (cf. v.9). Yet, if you stop to think, there is only one conclusion you can come to: making your own gods and then praying to them is absolutely absurd.

Verse 18 is probably referring to the craftsmen who make the images and not to the idols themselves, for also verse 19 speaks again about the ignorance of those who serve idols.

The first part of verse 20 is hard to explain. A better translation would probably be: "He who feeds on ashes, deceives his deluded heart." No animal is so dumb as to graze in ashes: who would look for food there? But in all reality they are worshipping firewood, and do not even ask themselves what they are actually doing. They deceive themselves if they think that these firewood-gods are able to help them. From the last part of verse 20 we could conclude that this is about a small handheld image.

Verse 21-23

The end of this section goes back to the beginning (vv. 6-8). God's people have to be well aware what the idol worship entails, and as a result to put their trust even more in God.

In verse 21 Israel is called by his old name "Jacob". God reminds them of the past. Already in the olden days God has "made" Jacob. They should not make their own gods but realize that they are God's own creation. God created Jacob to be his "servant". This meant that God had a definite destination for his people. God is adamant about his purpose. No matter how critical the situation is for Israel, God does

not forget his people, but he continues.

In verse 22 we are reminded of the fact that their distress is caused by their disobedience and sin and definitely not because God is powerless. On the contrary, this God is actually so omnipotent that he even conquers the sins of the people and purifies them. All the more reason to return to him!

Therefore it can end with a song of praise. Creation may jubilate about the great work of God. God “displays his glory”; God shows his greatness in his way with his people. Jacob is redeemed and shares in God’s glory, quite different from being put to shame for trusting in one’s idols.

4. Application for today

The purpose of the cutting remarks that God has for the idols and their makers is to cause Israel to put their trust again in the only true God.

He caused the exile to come about because of the sins of the people, and especially for their sin of idolatry. But he is also the one in whom they can find salvation. God is the first and the last. He was there in the very beginning and he will be there in time to come. He is the Rock on which his people can build. God conquers the sins of his people by way of salvation. He reaches the goal that he has set for his people. The end result will be praise, in spite of the difficulties of the moment. Idols leave you empty-handed, but he who trusts in God will never be put to shame. Even though they may see a bleak future for themselves, and even if they may be shaken in their confidence, the people of Judah may still have good reason to expect all things from their God, the only God.

This God, who holds the future in his hands, will still today go with his people. He who trusts in him will never be put to shame. God is still all-powerful. He is the incomparable God and beside him there is no other.

It is alarming how many people in our world exchange their trust in God for trust in themselves or in other people, or trust in science or technology, how they expect to be saved through human accomplishments.

It is equally disturbing that modern Christians replace God as he has revealed himself in his Word, with an idea that suits their own imagination. The “mature” man of this era no longer tolerates an almighty God; they do not want to be dependent on a God above them. This way they forfeit their future.

He who wants to be up-to-date must continue to put his trust in God, who is the first and the last, the God who cannot be compared to anyone else and who does not change. He who created the world and all who dwell therein, who is exalted above all, he alone gives assurance today and always. He has revealed himself as our Redeemer, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. That is the faithful word of God, also for this world.

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Using a Bible concordance, check the usage of the words *redeem* and *redeemer* in the book of Isaiah. There is a distinct difference between the usage of these words in Chapter 1-39 and 40-66.

Try to find an explanation for this difference. Note how many texts use these words.

2. Using a concordance, check where Isaiah uses the words “to make”, to *create* and *creator*. Pay attention to *who* it is that forms and creates. In connection with this, analyze the relationship between God and man. Point out also how Isaiah speaks about the way man forms or “creates.”
3. Say something about making and worshipping images, the background and the intention of this concept. Try to show why idol worship cannot compare to true religion and why idolatry is unnecessary.
4. Is it possible that the Israelites began to serve idols because they concluded from history that God was no longer helping them? They had doubts about their future. Also today many have their doubts about the future of the world and of the church. God's promises are slow in being fulfilled. Many people who are disappointed in God are seeking their salvation elsewhere. Discuss why this is understandable, but refute it with the words of Isaiah 44.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. Is there a difference between idol worship through the use of images and having a wrong image of God? Why?
2. In Isaiah 45:5 we read “apart from me there is no God”. In 1 Corinthians 8:4 Paul denies the existence of other gods and yet in verse 5 he says that there really are many *gods* and *lords*. To what extent can we say that idols really exist? Or, can something that does not exist, still influence us?
3. In Isaiah 44 God tells us something about himself and about the idols. What is the most notable difference between the relationship between God and man, and the relationship between an idol and man (see Outline 4 Section 2)?
4. When does something become an idol? Give some examples of modern-day idols.
5. The second commandment forbids the worship of God by way of an image. Are you allowed to have a picture of God in your mind, to have a mental image of him? If so, what are the criteria for such an image? What do you imagine God to be like?
6. Many people are of the opinion that the Christian faith is only a man-made theory. They often think it is fine that Christians find comfort in this faith, even if these people themselves see it just as a figment of their imagination. How can you refute this opinion?
7. Idols are dumb, deaf and blind, but God is the living God. How does that affect our relationship with him?

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